

Vital Records Management

Introduction

Vital records must be protected from destruction because they offer direct evidence of legal status, ownership, accounts receivable, and the particulars of obligations incurred by a state agency or authority. These records are critical because they contain information required to continue functioning during a disaster, or to reestablish operations after a calamity has ended. Vital records are irreplaceable, and in some instances must be maintained in their original form to be legally admissible as evidence.

State agencies and authorities whose vital records programs grow out of comprehensive records management will recognize overlaps in goals and methods for records preservation, and be able to achieve their objectives more economically and efficiently. Yet even by itself, vital records management is a cost-justifiable public strategy because it is a form of self-insurance that preserves a public trust.

Objective of Protecting Vital Records

The objective of vital records management is to prevent the loss of information critical to the continuing operation of an organization, in the most efficient and economical manner possible. In the public sector, vital records programs protect the public interest and ensure maintenance of individual rights.

Liabilities Due to Loss of Vital Records

Although vital records are small in volume, typically amounting to 3-5 per cent of office records, their destruction would halt an agency's daily business and endanger the public interest because of:

1. Vulnerability to litigation
2. Exposure to the unplanned expenses of financial settlements or loss of revenues
3. Disruption of efficiency due to gaps in information
4. Breaks in the continuity of operations

Although these potential dangers are similar to the risks posed by haphazard, unauthorized records destruction, losses that occur during a catastrophe carry an added burden because of the severe strain that a disaster places on staff and resources. A vital records management program will help to avoid these potential dangers.

The Process of Vital Records Management

Records Classification

Agencies must identify and analyze their record holdings by means of a routine records inventory (see section II-1) or file audit (see section VI-2) before instituting appropriate controls for vital records protection.

Records classification has been greatly simplified by the development and publication of general and specific retention schedules for use by state agencies and authorities. Records retention schedules are essentially lists of what types of records exist in an office, a description of their contents, as well as a list of the prescribed time periods for which they should be kept in both active storage in their office of origin and semicurrent storage at the Records Storage Center.

Once identified by inventory or audit and matched to their corresponding retention schedules, the records of each state office fit into one of four general categories:

1. **Nonessential records** — This type of record is listed on a records retention schedule for routine destruction in accordance with statewide guidelines. Loss of these records presents no obstacle whatsoever to restoring daily business.
2. **Useful records** — These are records that, if lost, might cause some inconvenience but could be easily replaced. Loss of these records does not present any real obstacle to restoring daily business.
3. **Important records** — This category of records, although replaceable, is reproduced only at considerable expense of funds, time, and labor. Loss presents aggravating but surmountable obstacles to resumption of operations.
4. **Vital records** — These records are irreplaceable, or are especially valuable in their original form. They are essential to the continuity of services during a calamity or the restoration of daily business if it has been interrupted.

Some examples of vital state agency records include the current, regularly updated information needed for daily activities such as accounts receivable; master personnel listings that include employee name, title, rate of pay, length of service, current leave time status, pension, disability and other insurance information, and increment and anniversary dates; irreplaceable research or development data; original, signed copies of major contracts or agreements, including change orders and amendments, and insurance policy information.

Other types of vital state agency records are the minutes of state agency boards, commissions, and other governing bodies, and the standing executive orders of commissioners or governors. These records are considered vital because they establish the policies that direct operations and may even provide the legal basis for an agency's existence.

Protection Methods

Estimating the severity of a calamity that could destroy a state agency's or authority's records is

a basic step in determining appropriate protection measures for vital records. This projection, along with an examination of costs of protection methods and budgetary levels, provides a basis for choosing options.

The three most commonly used ways to secure vital records are duplication and dispersal, on-site storage, and off-site storage:

1. **Duplication and dispersal** — Many records can be adequately protected by routinely distributing duplicate copies to one or more locations other than the central or primary building.

Duplicates may be created in paper, microfilm, or magnetic tape. In choosing a format, considerations should include volume, frequency of updates, storage requirements (especially any need for special environmental controls for magnetic tapes and microfilm master negatives), equipment and power requirements, and costs and budgetary levels.

Certain methods have clear-cut advantages, for example, computer output microfilm (COM) is particularly suited for storing large volumes of frequently updated computer runs (see section X-13).

Once created, duplicates may be distributed or dispersed in the agency's primary building. As part of regular operating procedures, records are often distributed to locations other than the agency's primary building. State agencies and authorities that use the division's microfilm production services have microfilm master copies stored at the Records Storage Center. State agencies that use the Office of Telecommunications and Information Services (OTIS) in the Department of the Treasury have computer back-up tapes held by OTIS and stored at the Records Storage Center (RSC). The records center maintains these dispersed records for their minimum retention periods and makes them available to appropriate officials.

Where vital records are not being dispersed as part of routine procedures, special measures should be adopted for distributing them solely for the purpose of protecting them. Use of this technique has practical limits imposed by the degree of care given to records by offices that have no specific need to receive them.

2. **On-site storage** — Often a state agency has only one facility, or only one facility with staff, equipment, and supplies capable of housing their active records.

On-site vital records considerations include the analysis and improvement of buildings or facilities, equipment, and supplies, as well as the institution of procedural controls. Examples are:

- a. **Building considerations** include eliminating such hazards as leakage and vermin infestation, and establishing the adequacy of floor load capacity, lighting and ventilation, fire ratings of walls and doors, smoke and fire alarms, sprinklers or other fire-suppression systems.
- b. **Equipment considerations** include the procurement of fire-resistant vaults, cabinets, or safes that meet or exceed Underwriter Laboratories specifications.

Underwriter Laboratories rates storage and filing equipment on the basis of interior temperature and humidity levels during various lengths of exposure to fire. As a general rule, paper begins to deteriorate at 350° F.; magnetic tape, microfilm, and photographs cannot survive conditions above 150° F.

- c. **Procedural considerations** include routinely updating vital records; prohibiting food, beverages, and smoking in records areas; segregating combustible material; and conducting periodic electrical, building, and fire inspections.

Agencies should regularly test their vital records programs through simulations to ensure adequate functioning in the event of a genuine emergency.

Exclusive reliance upon on-site vital records protection measures is not recommended because of the potential for total or near total destruction of a single location in a disaster.

- 3. **Off-site storage** involves keeping vital records in a single location separate from the agency's main building. An off-site storage center should be close enough for access, control, and updating. Locations that may be considered for off-site vital records storage include suitable, reasonably secure public buildings owned by a state agency, commission, or authority. Whenever vital records are semicurrent, they are eligible for storage at the RSC, provided that they meet all other storage criteria (see section III-3). However, many vital records are active, and therefore may not be stored at the RSC.

The advantages of central, off-site storage include:

- a. **General effectiveness** — It is less likely that an off-site storage facility, such as the RSC, will suffer the same disaster that occurs to an agency's building.
- b. **Ease of retrieval** — Unlike dispersal techniques where vital records may be distributed to a number of off-site locations, central off-site storage simplifies access and control over records.
- c. **Ease of staffing** — It is easier to justify the hiring of trained records professionals in the case of a centralized facility.

Program Staff

Vital Records Coordinator

For those state agencies and authorities that have already established a comprehensive records management program including procedures for managing vital records, the records manager is the most appropriate person to coordinate any special efforts required.

When no comprehensive program exists, it is advisable to appoint a coordinator from an existing office with considerable experience in managing records.

The vital records coordinator must become familiar with record holdings by conducting records inventories and by interviewing representatives to review their record holdings.

Vital Records Team

An important part of a successful vital records program is the appointment of appropriate staff members to assist the vital records coordinator. As its major function, this team of agency officials aids the coordinator in identifying vital records in order to provide adequate protection. Team members should have expertise in administration, finance, law, and records management. Division analysts are available to assist state agencies and authorities with their vital records management planning.

Communications

Because identifying vital records and selecting appropriate protection measures is necessary to prevent loss of critical information in the event of a disaster, the vital records coordinator must communicate policy and procedures to all offices and enlist their active participation and support.

Larger state agencies should consider publishing a vital records manual or incorporating a vital records section into their official policy and procedures documents, as well as conducting periodic seminars for officials and their staff. Smaller organizations will be able to use a more informal procedure, such as a vital records master list. If officials are aware of the importance of vital records and know the protection measures adopted by their organization, then it will be easier to assemble or reconstruct critical files. This will permit state services to continue without interruption should a disaster occur.

Summary

Vital records management programs are instituted to prevent the loss of information critical to the daily operations of state government, to permit agencies and authorities to continue functioning during a calamity, or to reestablish services afterward.

A vital records management program begins by conducting a records inventory to gain knowledge of record holdings. Records identified should be classified into one of four categories: nonessential, useful, important, and vital. Appropriate protection methods are chosen to safeguard vital records and include duplication and dispersal, and on-site and off-site storage. Vital records policies and procedures may then be communicated by issuing a vital records manual or through less formal means.

The Bureau of Records Management will aid state officials and their staff with vital records management. The bureau provides assistance to state offices without charge. Records analysts are available to visit offices for on-site consultations. Assistance is available by calling the Bureau of Records Management at (609) 530-3200, or writing: New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 2300 Stuyvesant Avenue, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey 08625.